

Erica Baum & Julia Rommel in Conversation: On multitasking, studio practices and new works for Independent 2023

Erica Baum: I'm not sure if I believe that multitasking is possible! I think about it more in terms of whether or not more than one thing is going on at the same time. For instance, in the studio I usually have the radio on and it's often the news or C-Span. Back when I was in graduate school I had a cassette player in the basement darkroom where there was no radio reception. I would listen to an assortment of store bought cassettes and homemade mixtapes. As a kid, I listened to the radio while I was reading. I'd listen to the same songs and re-read books so that they'd kind of blend together, *Let It Be* and the Narnia books, The Phantom Tollbooth and Smokey Robinson's *Tears of a Clown*, A Clockwork Orange and The Temptations' *Ball of Confusion*.



Erica Baum Studio

something more concrete and less indulgent than painting, because concentrating on the brush hitting the linen feels both frivolous and self-congratulatory. Why is any mark worth keeping, or worth making? It certainly takes me a while to figure out which marks will stick around. That decision usually comes after I lose track of a painting and then glimpse potentially powerful areas after some time. Similar to how you describe your process, this drift becomes a productive element. Paintings become effectively concealed, because, of course, we really are only capable of focusing on one thing at a time. That hiding and seeking and finding has its own momentum. Mostly it is permission to keep going.

In the studio I tune in and out. I start out really listening but then I get absorbed in my work and lose the thread. Still I appreciate the company of voices. Even when I'm fully attentive at least for a few minutes I can find myself drifting. Something will prompt a train of thought and then I'm somewhere else. I know that the internet and social media are messing with my attention span too. But allowing that drift is sometimes where an idea gets worked out or even originates. And that's where it becomes a kind of multitasking. Even if most of the time it can seem like a frustrating failure - what did I miss, what did I mean to do just then - If the things happening at the same time generate ideas or propel studio activities then it's ultimately moving in the same direction, as disjointed as it might sometimes appear.

Julia Rommel: I believe multitasking is useful in moving my paintings forward. I often allow my body and my attention to meander through the studio. This has long been a habit of mine, that I don't want to approach a work in its middle stages with obsessive concentration, because I feel like it does not serve the painting well, I'm too fussy and my touch can become detrimentally exacting. Perhaps it is also a deep insecurity... I have to pretend I'm doing

In contrast, usually the areas of a painting that I find exciting aren't doing a ton of different things at once: A uniform field of color might be powerful enough to do it all. And in the tenacious final editing, I find myself in a focused concentration, and looking for something singular.

Meanwhile I love your photography for its ability to multitask as singular pieces... a formal move also presents poetry, through the composition of words. The chance grouping can be more thrilling than a conscious choice. It's interesting that it requires your focused attention in order to get your images to do many things at once.

EB: Yes, I'm trying to get my works to multitask. A lot of my work comprises a dance between what's present and what's absent, as in the *Card Catalogues*, the *Naked Eye* and the *Dog Ear* series. In different ways, they all employ concealment and fragmentation to generate meaning. I want the viewer to recognize just enough information to be aware of the context but then also be released from it to experience something new.

I allow multitasking because it brings unexpected juxtapositions and trains of thought. The random soundtrack of passersby and car music blaring out of my second-floor window, the whole that can't be known, these chance moments in the studio exist within the work too.

I'm always curious about your process and I wonder if you can talk a little bit about what you're bringing to the Independent and how it's come about?

JR: The paintings I am making for the Independent expand upon a shift in my process that resulted from year of experimentation through the pandemic. In that time multitasking was perhaps at its maximum: so many dispersed attempts at manipulating the initial results of the experiments. Eventually a path forward opened for me, through preparing paintings' surfaces while they were wrapped around large plywood boxes or columns. Once unwrapped from the plywood structures, the multilayered surface kept the creases and strong geometry of its original form. I could make my first mark-making decision primarily in reaction to these results.

This development is interesting for me because it is in some ways a return to my way of working ten years ago, when I made small black monochromes whose completions were determined by the slightest accident, a mark or texture or fold, that made the painting compelling. Those works were actually first shown at the Independent with Bureau in 2012. Again, I am intentionally reducing the number of moves within each painting, trying to be ruthless about only allowing what is essential into an individual work. And perhaps similar to the process of concealment you describe above, this reductive act often involves cutting up and covering. Are such moves employed in the work you are making for the fair?



Julia Rommel Studio



Julia Rommel Studio

EB: I'm going to be showing work from a new series called *Fabrications* that's happening in tandem with an artist book I'm producing with Three Star Books. That's a kind of multitasking! I'm folding and overlapping pages from magazines and the book will be a nod to old sewing and craft magazines, material I've encountered through my sewing pattern project. I've been thinking that in some ways all this folding and reworking of the separate pages feels like it corresponds in some ways with the way you work. The process becomes part of the content.

I really appreciate the questions you are asking yourself and your decision-making strategies. Dividing your attention as a way to push forward makes a lot of sense to me. I really need to separate the different steps I take as well.

I have days where I think things are going really well but I always let it rest and look more dispassionately at a later time. The more interesting results are often the things I didn't notice in the initial moments. And they often arise from the days when I was too tired but I worked anyway. It's almost as if an oblique relationship to yourself and your work can be the most generative. These methods allow us to propel the work and keep it from being too self-conscious or predictable.

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